



# Naval Medical Research and Development

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## News Releases

### R&D Chronicles: Remembering NAMRU-5, the Navy's Medical Laboratory in Ethiopia, 1965-1977

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CAPT Craig K. Wallace, MC, USNR, Commanding Officer of NAMRU-5 attaches new door plaque identifying his command, July 1974. CAPT Wallace would serve four years in Ethiopia, first as OIC of the NAMRU-3 Detachment Addis Ababa (1972-1974) and then as CO of NAMRU-5 (1974-1976).

*For “unflagging professionalism, resourcefulness and determination in carrying out their assigned duties...”*

~NAMRU-5’s Meritorious Unit Commendation, 1977

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Forty years ago—in the midst of a bloody civil war that would see the ousting of the Ethiopian monarchy—the Navy Medical Research Unit No. 5 was disbanded. This would not only mark the end of Navy Medicine’s history in Ethiopia, but also the very name of *NAMRU-5*.

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For much of the twentieth century—first as regent (1916-1930) and later as emperor (1930-1974)—Haile Selassie would be the symbol and very embodiment of the Ethiopian nation. An international figure, Selassie forged many deep diplomatic and military ties with other nations during his 58-year reign. In 1953, Selassie would negotiate a historic military assistance agreement with the United States that would pave the way for increased American presence in his country.

Over the next decades, the U.S. Navy would operate a communications station and clinic in Asmara (then part of the Ethiopian Federation); and on December 31, 1965, the Navy opened a detachment of NAMRU-3 (Cairo, Egypt) at the Imperial Central Laboratory and Research Institute in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.

The NAMRU-3 Detachment-Addis Ababa formally commenced operations in September 1966 under the directorship of civilian scientist Dr. Jack Schmidt and a staff of 26 Americans, one British physician, and 37 local nationals. Its mission was to “conduct research and development on infectious diseases of military importance in sub-Saharan Africa.”

The laboratory shepherded studies on malaria parasites, river blindness, elephantiasis, louse-borne diseases, insecticide-resistance, and trypanosomiasis or East African Sleeping Sickness. A vector-borne disease commonly transmitted by the tsetse fly, sleeping sickness can manifest in fever, severe headaches, extreme fatigue, swollen lymph nodes, aching joints and an infection of the central nervous system which, if left untreated, would result in death. It was first reported by the laboratory in 1967 and soon after would appear in epidemic form throughout Ethiopia.

Laboratory scientists would not only track its source, but also contain it.

Owing to the increasingly strategic role it was playing in theater, the Navy elevated the lab from a detachment to an independent command — *NAMRU-5* — on July 1, 1974. The NAMRU was organized into four departments—Administration, Clinical Investigation, Veterinary Medicine and Medical Zoology. Under an agreement with the imperial government, the lab also operated a 20-bed clinical research unit at St. Paul’s Hospital in Addis Ababa and a field station for malaria research in the western lowlands of Gambela. At its peak, the new NAMRU oversaw 25 percent of the infectious disease research being conducted by the Navy.

Over the next two years *NAMRU-5* would be comprised of a staff of five naval officers, two U.S. civilian scientists, an Air Force officer, a senior medical resident, a guest scientist, nine Navy enlisted technicians and 57 Ethiopian nationals. Laboratory personnel would also have collateral duty as national health consultants and some held faculty positions at Addis Ababa University.

But despite its success, political timing was not on *NAMRU-5*’s side. Just months after being re-designated a NAMRU, Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed by the Marxist Derg (AKA, “Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army”). Sooner rather than later, things got rough for the staff for *NAMRU-5*. The new Communist-leaning Ethiopian Ministry of Public Health began placing restrictions on the lab’s field studies and threatened closure of its clinical research unit. Personnel were targeted by shootings, faced curfews and increased anti-American sentiment.

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On April 23, 1977, the Ethiopian government ordered the closure of several U.S. government facilities in Ethiopia including *NAMRU-5*. All Americans were given just 72 hours to leave the country. The lab's research data and non-fixed research equipment was transferred to the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa for disposition back to the United States.

The *NAMRU-5* command would be awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation by the Secretary of the Navy in 1977 for its devotion to duty and performance despite the many challenges faced.

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